

Weaponizing children and childhood during war and crisis

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Children have traditionally been seen primarily as innocent victims of specific forms of violence during armed conflict, advocated for as “zones of peace,” and considered to exist outside of the politics of war, in need of rescue by humanitarians, militaries, and states. Despite the coherence of these narratives, children in armed conflict have always inhabited more ambiguous roles and positions, such as both victims and perpetrators of violence at the same time, or struggling to escape their objectification in discourses of security and care. Devastating conflicts such as Israel’s war on Gaza, Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the war against ISIL/Daesh, and internationalized civil wars in Sudan and Tigray among others have rather demonstrated the multitudinous ways in which children and childhood are weaponized during armed conflict. We can understand weaponization to mean the intentional physical or symbolic inclusion or targeting of children to achieve humanitarian, military or political goals in armed conflict situations, by any state, group, or individual involved in the conflict. This approach provides a more holistic and integrated assessment of the range of ways children are involved in armed conflict, and provides the starting question for this workshop. The term weaponization is chosen deliberately to indicate that children are intentionally involved in armed conflict to help achieve the aims of one or more actors, challenging the view that children are largely marginal to war and primarily affected as collateral damage.

Previous research has predominantly focused on child soldiering as the most direct form of children’s weaponization. However, weaponization can extend to a much broader set of ways children become implicated in warfare, such as their direct targeting in genocide, the mobilization of the image of suffering children or children as the future to motivate action, or the care and support work children perform during the efforts of a total war. Considering these developments, children’s agency must be centered, as many children choose to take part in being weaponized, and the denial of children’s agency is a cornerstone of their systematic marginalization and the construction of childhood.

Consequently, this workshop will seek to investigate questions about:

- The definition, utility, implications, and problems with using weaponization as a frame of analysis for children’s involvement in armed conflict;
- The ways in which children and childhood are weaponized in armed conflict, whether contemporary or historical, including but extending beyond child soldiering;
- How the weaponization of children and childhood intersects with power structures such as those of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and more;
- How children’s agency figures in their involvement in different forms of weaponization; and,
- The implications of weaponization for children themselves, their societies, and the course of armed conflicts.